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The Director of Central Intelligence

Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

13 February 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
Secretary of State
Secretary of Defense
Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs

FROM : Robert M. Gates
Chairman, National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT : After Andropov: The Coming Turbulence in Soviet Politics

Attached for your information is a look ahead at Soviet politics that I believe you will find useful following the Chernenko accession. It points to the prospects for increasing turbulence in Soviet politics and the potential for changes in policy. The assessment was prepared by the National Intelligence Officer for the USSR, Fritz Ermarth.

Robert M. Gates
Chairman

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: After Andropov: The Coming Turbulence in Soviet Politics

1. In the immediate aftermath of Chernenko's accession to the CPSU General Secretaryship, the short-run pattern of Soviet politics is hard to predict. Clearly there is a strong impulse in the Soviet leadership for continuity and stability of both policy and politics. The selection of an aged party stalwart, previously passed over, is a vivid reflection of this impulse. A number of factors argue for its continued influence in the short term: The "old guard" on the Politburo is clearly in charge and presumably is in no mood to see its boat rocked. Even the younger members have been raised in the Brezhnev tradition of keeping peace within the leadership family. (C)

2. Nevertheless there are important factors that argue for a quickened tempo of political maneuvering and factionalism within the Chernenko-led Politburo. Clearly he did a lot of engineering to gain the post of General Secretary in the last month or so before Andropov's death. But it is not clear that he has the political base to secure his tenure against the ambitions of younger aspirants and the resentments of older colleagues, particularly the members of the Andropov coalition, Ustinov and Gromyko, whose calculations were disappointed by Andropov's early incapacitation. The fact that nominating speech was made by Tikhonov, rather than one of the younger Politburo members, e.g. Gorbachev or Romanov, or one of the seniors associated with Andropov's accession, suggests that all was not smoothed over in the Chernenko selection. The revelation that Andropov was on dialysis since February 1983 carries the connotation that his administration was a tenuous gamble from the start. Chernenko may wish to pursue some of Andropov's policies very cautiously, such as his modest economic reforms, and quietly to step back from the anti-corruption program that imperils the entire party apparatus, especially leaders associated with Brezhnev. But he and his colleagues will also be under a lot of pressure to show that they are not utterly immobilized by age, ill health, and old political habits. (C)

3. The plenum speeches already indicate the balancing act that Chernenko will perform. Most important, Tikhonov nominated Chernenko as a leader solicitous of his followers interests, having a "well-wishing" attitude toward cadres. And Chernenko responded by recognizing his "strategic base" in the local party committees and Tikhonov's state apparatus which was given assurances against excessive party interference. Chernenko spoke strongly but vaguely in favor of economic management reform

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and against bureaucrats hiding behind experiments (which is all the further Andropov's program got.) But he knows talk is cheap in this area. He declaimed on the importance of Soviet defenses in keeping the peace; he was slightly more eloquent on the interests of Soviet consumers. In foreign policy, Chernenko stressed the need for peaceful coexistence and toughness toward the USSR's enemies. He signaled a desire to improve US-Soviet relations by refraining from explicit criticism of the US or President Reagan. The tenor of his speech leaves no doubt that reassurance of the party apparatus is his major platform. (C)

4. Chernenko has the image of a second-rate servitor and came to power on a negative platform -- the party apparatus' anxiety about where Andropov's policies, particularly his anti-corruption drive, were headed. But Chernenko cannot rule on that basis; he has to come up with a positive program which may prove to be beyond his personal and political capacities. Early political appointments and leadership rhetoric on key policy issues will give indications as to the pattern of Soviet politics under Chernenko. It could be a period of quiet as the next transition is awaited; or it equally could be very lively. (C)

5. In a longer time perspective, however, during and certainly after Chernenko's assuredly short tenure, the prospect is for more turbulence and novelty in Soviet politics than we have witnessed for many years. There are two reasons for this prognosis:

-- First, the foreign and domestic problems facing the Soviet leadership are severe. The promise of past policies to deal effectively with them, even along lines of muddling through, is not bright. The pressure on the leadership to come up with some new policy solutions, in both domestic and foreign affairs, is unusually heavy. This does not mean that Soviet leaders must undertake bold innovation simply to survive. If the conservative coalition over which Brezhnev presided were able to live indefinitely, its policies might be continued with only minor modification. But newer, younger leaders who are striving to make their fortunes are likely to use policy innovation, and critique of past policies, as their platform. It would be a grave error to assume that the innovation they will favor will be in liberal directions. As the brief Andropov period indicated, "getting the country moving again" may be tried on the basis of increased labor discipline and neo-Stalinist ideological lines. In foreign policy, innovation may involve risk-taking and more tactical agility than we have recently seen. In any event, the pressure is on to try some new lines and, notwithstanding the tremendous force of conservatism in the ruling elite, there will be more men coming to the top with an interest in experimentation. (C)

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-- Second, the pace and generational structure of Soviet politics are certain to change at all levels of the system. As many observers have pointed out, the present transition is not just the selection of a General Secretary young enough to have a respectable life expectancy. This challenge presents itself at all levels of Soviet rule. Stalin's purges destroyed several generations of potential Soviet political leaders. He built his system on a new generation of men, then in their thirties and forties, who continued to rule the USSR for the next forty years. Now they are finally dying off. This has two important implications:

- a. The leadership generation coming to the fore is post-war and partly post-Stalin in its formative political experiences. Some observers contend that it is more liberal than its elders. This may be the case with regard to a willingness to experiment with new management techniques; it is not the case with regard to civic freedoms or human rights. Others see in the new generation a neo-Stalinist "law and order" conservatism in domestic matters and nationalistic self-confidence toward the outside world. Neither perspective is subject to firm documentation. In any case, the new generation is certainly better educated and experienced in dealing with the complex problems of the Soviet economy than its predecessors were. It is better informed about the outside world through travel and official access to information. Most of this generation has grown up in a period of Soviet progress toward super-power status and are less familiar with the period of Soviet weakness. They see the possession and use by the USSR of its superpower status in the world as natural in the defense and advancement of their interests. (C)

- b. Precisely because the system has not witnessed a massive purge in nearly fifty years, Soviet politics are now likely to see a "normal" but, in Soviet conditions, unfamiliar pace of leadership turnover. Men in their fifties will reach the top of their careers, at whatever level, and then be replaced in their sixties. We have been used to seeing the same old faces for up to twenty years (Gromyko's for nearly thirty). Now the faces will change in five to ten years. This kind of turnover will produce a degree of turbulence Soviet politics for which we are not prepared as observers and the Soviets are not prepared as participants. Politics and their impact on policy are likely to be less predictable than during the last twenty years or so. (C)

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6. The question arises as to whether future Soviet politics will be more or less easily interpreted than in the past. A preliminary judgment is that, in the short run, we shall be at a disadvantage because we [redacted] are looking at an unfamiliar scene. Over the longer term, however, things will probably improve a lot. We shall get more experienced as observers, even as the Soviets are learning anew how to play politics. Moreover, political turbulence is likely lead to a greater volume of public, if esoteric, communications out of the system as players compete for constituencies. We should see an openness about policy dispute at least as great as that of the Khrushchev period. [redacted] 25X1 25X1 25X1

7. While we are trying to call the shots on a particular leadership succession, we must not forget that we are at a turning point, or turning phase, in Soviet history. It will be the underlying forces in Soviet politics and society that determine the degree of challenge to US security and interests. From the US point of view, the most important feature of the continuing leadership transition in Moscow is that a new generation of rulers is emerging at the same time as the elite is trying to decide (so far inconclusively) on the nature and staying power of the American challenge it faces. (S)

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